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## The Fifth Incident

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**Y**ou alone are able to recall a series of impossible incidents. Inexplicable events that no one else seems to remember. When you try to remind those around you, you find that their memories have been washed away like sand by the tide.

Never mind, you say; it must've been a dream.

But it wasn't a dream, and you want answers. You'll try to figure it out on your own. Soon your head aches from contemplating each event, as if they're puzzles one step from being solved, words on the tip of your tongue—and the more you pry at their mystery, the more blotted the details become. If you continue to press and prod, your own memory may become blotted as well.

You'll start over. Ponder them in random order, unimposed by a strained eye. Let them come to you as they will.

You begin.

### Incident #3: Royal Maddox Ballet

The curtains open on a highly anticipated night. It's the premiere performance of a famous ballet company, and in the middle of a sequence filled with pastel frill and ethereal spring, the prima ballerina staggers to a clumsy stop. The audience murmurs, uncertain of whether this is part of the choreography and surprised if it is, but it isn't. She sways awkwardly center stage as the other ballerinas dance around her, some watching with worry in stolen glances while others snap whispers to her that go unheard. A trembling hand goes to her stomach as her gaze hovers above the crowd. Her gossamer makeup shimmers.

At this point she's supposed to be positioned on the prop balcony upstage, but the spotlight is empty and her fellow dancers do their best to adapt to the sweet-string melody. The man with

slicked hair who is cast as the prince approaches her and holds out his hand. This is unlike her. He intends to lead her offstage and thinks she must be terribly and abruptly ill. He'll carry her like the princess she's playing and an eager understudy will take her place after a premature intermission. But that's not what happens.

The prima ballerina's lips part as a broken sound escapes from her throat. The raspy drawl continues in a held note that crescendos louder and louder, until even the audience can hear it, and they shift in their seats. The prince moves to intervene, but the prima screams. He jumps back.

The ballerinas halt, utterly confused.

The music fades into silence.

The prima slowly looks down. Something ripples up her legs, the movement visible through her tights as it skitters up her arms and neck. It resembles scales, rounded folds of skin that lift off her as their edges deepen in color. Some of them bloom blue, others rosy pink, and a few jasmine white.

Flower petals.

Her chin rises as the petals reach her face, and right before her frightened features are consumed, she drops to her knees. The petals shudder. She takes one last glance at the prince with her remaining eye.

He sucks in a breath. He steps away.

The prima's eye vanishes. The outline of her figure flutters, no longer solid flesh. Then, her floral socket collapses in on itself, followed by her head. It concaves into her body as her costume falls to the floor and forms a lifeless pile over her pointe shoes.

A phantom wind sweeps in then, as if on cue. It swirls around the lonely costume and plucks up the petals, snaking higher and higher to meet the rows of lights that glow brighter and brighter. The glare causes everyone to squint, and when the lights dim and their sight adjusts, the petals are nowhere to be seen.

The curtains sweep shut.

You snap back to the present. The incident played out in your mind so clearly it felt like you were there, an invisible presence among the audience.

You realize that you've been going about this the wrong way. Instead of searching for complex clues with a magnifying glass, you'll take note of the simplest information first: a location.

You scrunch your eyes and focus. An image comes to mind but it's obstructed, a blurry building lined with unfocused lights. Your thoughts are too strained again. Relax.

You relax. So does the image. It's the ballet theater, golden and grand, and then you're zooming outwards to overlook the metropolis it resides in. A location slips into your memory, locking into place.

New York City, New York.

On to the next.

### Incident #1: Pacific Naval Base

#### *San Diego, California*

It's midnight in the bay harbor when a thick fog rolls over the docks. At pier five, a sailor stands bracketed by the silhouette of a palm tree on one side, a looming ship on the other. He's fresh to the Navy and strong with potential but nervous to come aboard for the first time.

The meandering mist carries the smell of Nevv-Dull to his nose, the cleaning solution having done its job well as the brass fittings shine along the ship, even in the dark. For three weeks the boat will remain docked, then it will travel up the coast to Canada. All the while he'll be forced to share a tiny compartment where he'll sleep on a tiny rack and be given an even tinier locker to store what little possessions he has. He doesn't look forward to this fate, but he'll never fulfill it anyway.

Because the fog will get to him first.

Only one person sees it happen: the officer of the deck who he's supposed to report to. The officer is at the top of the gangplank, completely used to seeing the knot-tied nerves of new sailors. He finds that it's best to give them the space they need, so he waits. Patiently watching.

The sailor approaches the ramp to the ship, then retreats to pace on the dock. His footsteps clack as his thumbs twiddle, and even in the cool, calm air his face prickles with anxiety. He's unaware that behind him the fog starts to follow, trailing like a snake in the water. The officer peers down from the gangplank. His brows furrow at the mist's unusual behavior. The sailor doesn't notice. He doesn't notice when the fog takes shape over his shoulder and mimics the figure of a man. He doesn't notice when

the opaque figure takes on the same way of walking to imitate the form of *him*. The fog-man strides at the sailor's heels and matches his precise movements; still unaware, the sailor stops pacing to give himself a reassured nod. He's ready to embark.

The fog is also ready. But not for that.

In a sighing motion, it slides its wispy arms around the sailor in a trapping embrace. It's then that the sailor finally notices and struggles against the grip that prevents him from escape. Neither he nor the officer knows how to process what's happening.

Despite his wriggles the sailor is held tighter and tighter until he's pulled into the figure itself like prey sucked into milky tar. He releases a fading cry as he's completely absorbed—and then the figure stands alone. For a few moments it doesn't move, just stares out at the gleam of black ocean.

Water laps at the dock.

The palm fronds sway, unphased by the autumn haze.

The figure drags its gaze away from the sea to look up at the officer. At the patient, patient man. Then, it brings its feet together in a mocking salute, and dissipates away into the night.

What year did this happen?

There are no records you can rely on regarding the incidents, no official accounts to look into. But when you research more about the naval base, you discover that the pier in question was decommissioned in 1975.

You backtrack to the New York City incident and find that the ballet theater was shut down as well, with only a vague explanation of why: haunted. No one would've remembered the floral ballerina, and yet, something remained wrong about the place. With a shaky hand, you scribble the respective years of closing and notice that both dates end with the number five. It may not be relevant, but it's something.

It's something.

#### Incident #4: Emerald Motel

*Eugene, Oregon*

*2005*

In the early hours of dawn at a cheap motel, a woman jerks awake beside her husband. She sits up to see the exact same thing she'd

been dreaming of: a color. The small room is saturated with an emerald glow, illumination from the enormous motel sign outside that pierces through the thinly veiled windows. The light undulates across every wall and corner, reminiscent of reflective water.

*I could swim in this color,* the woman thinks.

She and her husband have stayed at the motel for a few days now. They're a picturesque couple traveling up the coast for an adventurous vacation, but ever since they arrived here, her mind has felt muddled. Her eyes search for something she can't quite place, earning questions of concern from her husband as they lie poolside, or flip through television channels, or consider which complimentary oatmeal packet they'll have for breakfast. She always tells him not to worry.

Within the quiet of their room, the woman places a hand to her cheek. It feels hot. It must be the summer heat. She pinches the front of her nightgown and waves the silky material back and forth as she pads over to the window, where she splits the curtains open just a bit. A slice of light shines down her face as she gazes up at the motel sign, a tower of green that hums like the lull of some beacon. It's an eerie but welcome distraction from her distracted mind. She blinks and looks away, rubbing the little sparks that remain in her vision, then returns to bed and gives her husband a gentle kiss on the forehead. But as she pulls away, she gasps.

The spot on his skin where her lips have touched glimmers, as if lit up from below, and before she can understand what it is, an emerald flame flickers to life from his forehead. Quick as a snap of the fingers, the flame ignites into a rippling wave. It engulfs him entirely. The woman startles and tries to put the fire out, but the flames don't yield. She then stumbles out of bed and into the rising dawn, shouting for help as guests emerge from their rooms, and they rush over to hers with bare feet and messy pajamas. They stop in their tracks the moment they see her. The motel owner is among them. He stares at the woman with a mixture of horror and awe.

She tells him that her husband is on fire.

The owner tells her that she is too.

He points to her reflection in the window, and she follows the line of his finger. He's right. Green flames dance around her body and slip through her hair as her nightgown flutters and ruffles. Somehow her skin is unburned, but it's hot and stinging.

And she's bright.

So bright that it hurts her own eyes, yet she refuses to shut them. This is what she's been waiting for, she realizes, beholding her fiery reflection with clear attention. This is what she sensed was coming. She's being claimed.

By what, or why, she doesn't know.

A hand appears at the doorframe of her room as her husband comes out to find her. The poor man is half-awake, unaware of what emanates from both him and his wife as the motel guests gape at them, a couple ablaze. He asks what everyone is doing outside, and with a sniff and a forced smile, the woman tells him not to worry. She opens her arms to him as heat flares off in billowing green sleeves. He nuzzles into her neck.

Together, they make a brilliant picture.

Together, they crackle and succumb to the flames, until they become the flames.

Together, they're reduced to nothing but two floating orbs of fire, and as the sun breaks over the horizon, the pair of emerald lights snuff out.

Summer. It was summer when the motel incident happened.

You take note of the season, as well as those of the incidents prior. You're on the right track, the momentum rolling in your chest like a train gathering speed. You'll lay out all your findings later, but for now you need to keep going.

Keep going.

## Incident #2: Sunny Grove Garden

*Jacksonville, Florida*

*Winter of 1985*

After a third person goes missing in the public garden, the residents of a high-end complex known as Sunny Grove bar off the entry and stop all visits. Parents reprimand their children for even nearing its gates and snatch away bowls used to collect blackberries growing through the bars. Announcements made at the local schools warn away anyone dumb enough to enter on a dare. Maintenance workers quit their jobs tending to the statues and flora, not as bothered by the unemployment as they are by the uneasy feeling left lingering on their shoulders.

In their absence, the garden grows.

It's wild now, a quiet wilderness, and not one bird, squirrel, or bug has stayed, as if they no longer have the nerve. Stale muck creeps across the surface of ponds. Moss smears the smiles of winged sculptures. The foliage once trimmed in rigid rectangles oozes onto the walkways, slowly cracking through the speckled white cobblestones.

On one winter's day, a group of teenagers screech their bikes to a stop before the garden gates. Vines snake past the metal that the teens stomp on before climbing over, and upon touching down, the kids zip up their jackets to guard against the chill permeating the perpetual sunshine.

They're not here on a dare. Rather, they're here to find those who the police and volunteer sweeps couldn't. A noble effort, they all believe. But mostly they're just curious. Their sneakers thud over a gazebo bridge, and from its central view, the teens swivel their lanky necks.

"Ravi!" a shaggy-haired boy calls out. Ravi is the name of his friend, the latest missing resident. The boy then shoves down an irrational fear that swells in his stomach, the feeling that he's just given their position away to something.

"Ravi!" another girl shouts.

The rest wait and listen.

No response.

Speckles of rain turn the air thick and the sunlight a tender shade of amber. As a breeze drifts past, the hairs on the backs of their necks shoot up.

The garden knows they're here.

They scuttle more quickly now, searching for any sign. But there's nothing. Section by section they cover the garden expanse, and, unsuccessful, they decide to briefly rest in a grove tucked away to the side. It's a quaint area fragrant with honey. As they catch their breath, they hear something. It's faint. They turn to look at a tree that one of them is leaning against.

The tree is looking back.

Eyes blink at them from the whirls of bark. They open and close out of sync like a malfunctioning robot, and a muffled voice comes from within. Half the group bolts away, terrified, and the other half freezes. The shaggy-haired boy knows those eyes. They belong to Ravi.

The boy lurches forward to tear at the bark and disregards the pricks that repel his prying fingers. The others help as they rip

away at the trunk and plunge their hands into a sticky substance that encases Ravi as the smell of putrid honey bursts forth. They wipe their hands on their shirts after pulling him out and are mortified to see that he now appears as an arboreal zombie: his arms have been eaten away to stumps of bark and bone, his legs intact but strangely discolored, and his face is covered in a rotten slime. Ravi groans, a plea for help, and his eyes go wide as a strong gale whips at their clothing. They need to leave.

They hold Ravi up by the waist and run to the gate, not even sure what they're running from. But with every hurried step, Ravi's feet crack under his weight like splintering wood. His calves follow suit in rapid deterioration as his height shortens and shortens, until he's writhing in the grass and urging them to go on without him.

Reluctantly, they do.

Back in the complex, their hysterics cause concerned adults to search the garden once again. A large gathering wrenches open the rusted gates, and upon finding Ravi's corpse, the adults carefully crack open every single tree within the grove. There they find remnants of the other missing residents: a worn toy and a small backpack.

But the children themselves are already gone.

This was the last incident that you know of. You must piece them together now. You take a step back and scan the details you've collected. They all seem blaringly simple but were difficult to pin down, like fish slipping out of your grip. They read:

*Incident #1: Pacific Naval Base. San Diego, California. Autumn of 1975.*

*Incident #2: Sunny Grove Garden. Jacksonville, Florida. Winter of 1985.*

*Incident #3: Royal Maddox Ballet. New York City, New York. Spring of 1995.*

*Incident #4: Emerald Motel. Eugene, Oregon. Summer of 2005.*

All in the same country.

On a map of the United States you mark a dot on each city, and after connecting the dots, you see that they form a loose box. Chronologically they start from the bottom left and move counter clockwise, and every event correlates with the order of seasons.

They always occur mid-decade as well—which means if a fifth incident were to happen, it would happen soon.

But where would it take place? The box on the map is already complete, there are no other dots to connect. And during which season? The next incident doesn't seem like it would be another dot in the cycle. It feels like the culmination of it.

You flip through your calendar in the hope that seasonal scenery will stir an idea. As snowy mountains, flowering trees, green hills, and crinkled leaves flash by, something catches your attention. There's a particular day boxed in here, and in the center of the box is a dot. You don't even recall highlighting this day, but it does give you an idea. Side by side you examine the similar boxes between the calendar and the map, then determine a central location on the map that you mark with a matching middle dot.

This is it. The specifics are lacking, such as an address or a time, but you don't need that. You can do what you did before. Follow a feeling. Something's calling you here, and you know that it'll guide you to the fifth and final incident, to exactly where you need to go. So you go.

#### Incident #5: What Happened to You

*Cheyenne Bottoms, Kansas*

*Autumn Equinox of 2015*

In the heartland of America, you stand in the middle of a wetland. This area is supposed to be ripe with wildlife, migratory shorebirds and critters of all kinds, but the animals are quick to make themselves scarce.

This is where the feeling has brought you. A flat marsh spritzed with grass, a spread of shallow pools that mirror the clouds like an upside-down sky. Anticipation twists in your gut as you track the sun's progress. You wait for it to be directly overhead, because that's when it's time.

As the sun finally moves into place, the ground starts to shake, bringing on a vibration that jitters your nerves apart. You stumble as the vibrations increase. Your ears ache, your head throbs. Everything flips and now you can't tell which way is up, if you're flying or falling, and the vibrations get faster, higher, louder, *until—*

A tremendous flash.

The world goes white, blinding you in a merciless moment that forces you to press your palms to your eyes. The vibrations drop. The ground goes still.

With every inhale, your vision returns. Scenery seeps in like watercolor, and when the pain recedes, you can see that you're no longer in the flatland. You're in a darker version of it, with the same wet grasses and mirrored clouds below, but instead of blue sky above there's a yawning black void. And it's very cold. It doesn't help that your feet are bare, and your clothes are gone.

Something soft brushes the bottom of your feet. You look down at a path of flower petals that snakes ahead into the darkness, so you take to the trail. At the end of it lies a grove. A quaint area fragrant with honey. Two trees are situated on either side of your entry, their branches split like limbs and their trunks split like legs. The only things that keep the area alit are a pair of emerald flames that wander and float as their light casts green ripples across your skin.

The petals guide you straight to the grove's center where a thin fog hovers, and from it a figure emerges. It's made of a similar fog, but dense and milky, with features that wisp and waver. You sense that it's pleased you're here. You speak.

"It was never me viewing those incidents, was it?" you say. "It was you." It used your curiosity to draw you here by showing you every mystery.

A tinge of confirmation knocks into your mind like a boat tied to a dock. You glance at the trees, the petals, the flames, the fog. "You claimed the souls of these people." People it deemed the best of humankind: your young, your beautiful, your in-love, your prime. "And I'm the last one. The last soul you'll claim."

Another confirmation. There've been many places before, many countries whose people it's taken. To this figure, years are mere minutes in which it crawls across the land and—

A sensation crashes into you as if a dam has burst in your brain. The figure is sending you its intention: to weave the souls together like thread. Thread with enough life-essence to fabricate a never-ending season, one that will be laid atop the natural four like a blanket of its own making. And you're a unique stitch in the design. The center of a web that holds the threads together.

Not even you are allowed to glimpse what the fifth season will encompass. Not even you can imagine.

But the figure is done communicating. The fog leaves its side to glide over to you and picks up the petals to swirl around your body. The emerald flames cease their wandering to halo about your head, and roots from the trees slosh through the soil to circle your feet. Thoroughly encased, you can just barely make out the figure's face on the other side of the fog. It's smiling. It turns you into something just as frighteningly beautiful as the other souls. When you flip your hands front to back, you witness your own claiming as your skin fades to translucent and icy crystals creep up your fingers. Clouds of violet roil beneath your chest as lightning cracks lavender in your veins. You hear the thunder of every streak, wince at every bolt, and then you're lighting up the entire grove as a torrent of violent purple builds up inside you. Your crystalized body begins to fracture.

Perhaps in another world there's a version of you who would survive this. Perhaps they're watching this incident as you watched the others. You're content with the knowledge that you're about to be claimed—that you'll advance the fifth season yet to come—as long as they're out there, existing.

The storm explodes out of you like electric glass.  
And you shatter.